



Kentucky Department of Agriculture News

Bill Clary, Director of Public Relations, Kentucky Department of Agriculture



Eggs come first, but Shaw Farm offers much more

By **CHRIS ALDRIDGE**, *Kentucky Agricultural News*

Folks who don't know Viola Shaw by name call her "The Chicken Lady" or "The Egg Lady."

She responds to both with pride, as the nicknames are testaments to the success of her product, Shaw Farm Country Eggs, at the farmers' market in New Castle, 10 minutes from her 80-acre Henry County farm.



"We did really good," Viola said of her first year of selling at the market last year with her daughter and business partner, Jennifer Escobar. "We sold large amounts of eggs," noting her biggest sale was 52 dozen to a local church group.

This year, Viola nearly doubled the size of her operation, adding a new flock of 300 Golden Comet hens to her two flocks of Golden Comets and a few Black Australorps that totaled about 400.

"With 700 chickens, I get 500 to 600 eggs a day," she said, noting 80 percent of her hens lay one egg every day.

To handle the increased production, Jennifer has taken over sales in New Castle on Wednesdays and Saturdays, while Viola sells her eggs on Thursdays and Saturdays to a farmers' market at the new Norton Commons neighborhood in suburban Louisville.

"I got into eggs because I like chickens," Viola said. "I like that I can make money on the farm and not have to take a public job. And I enjoy it."



“We have always had a home garden for ourselves and a few chickens,” she added. “I was born and raised on a farm [in nearby Defoe], and I married a farmer, too. I’ve been farming for 31 years now.”

Shaw Farm started out as a dairy farm, then switched almost entirely to pigs before selling most of them to buy hens. In fact, her huge, concrete-floored chicken coop originally was a pig barn.

Viola raises true free-range chickens not confined by cages or nets. The only time Viola keeps her chickens penned up during the day is if they start laying eggs in places other than their nests inside the coop. But once they resume the proper routine, she lets them out again.

“I let ‘em out every day in the morning and put ‘em back up at night,” Viola said. “I’m almost organic; I just don’t want to go through the process to be certified. The only thing I give mine are vitamins as chicks. They are fed with non-GMO [genetically modified organism] corn from Bagdad Roller Mills.”

Viola believes her fresh, light brown eggs taste better than conventional white ones sold in groceries. She shared that her daughter-in-law was once reluctant to try a farm-fresh egg; now her son’s wife prefers them over white eggs.

“They’re lower in cholesterol than store-bought eggs,” Viola said. “My chickens run free and eat bugs, while the chickens that lay store-bought eggs are fed entirely with grain.”

Another advantage of her farm-fresh eggs is shelf life. Because most of her eggs are only a few days old when they are sold at farmers’ markets, they last about a month before spoiling.

Viola would like to increase her flocks to 1,000 egg-laying hens and expand into producing pastured broiler chickens. She is also planting another vegetable garden to grow gherkin-sized cucumbers, which were hot sellers last summer at the New Castle farmers’ market.

Viola’s garden will include three new vegetables this spring – spinach, cilantro and loose leaf lettuce. The mother-daughter duo will sell two value-added products at farmers’ markets – Jennifer’s goat milk soap and, when in season, home-baked apple, cherry, sweet potato and pumpkin pies.

Shaw Farm sells a percentage of its eggs and vegetables to Grasshoppers Distribution LLC, which supplies produce and products fresh from the farm to Louisville-area restaurants.

“We like the idea,” Viola said. “We think this will be another good opportunity to expand and get the word out about Kentucky Proud farm-fresh products.”

It also allows more mouths to sample Shaw Farm Country Eggs.



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